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WASHINGTON (AP) - A Republican Senate leader who had a leading role in thwarting President Carter's first choice for CIA director said Monday he is 'concerned'' that the second choice; Adm. Stansfield Turner; plans to retain his military rank if he gets the job.

Senate Minority Leader Howard Baker of Tennessee said he feared that having an officer on active duty in charge could 'damage the credibility of the CIA'' as an agency independent of the military.

Baker's statement came on the eve of Senate Intelligence Committee hearings on the nomination of Turner; a 53-year-old career Navy man who was Carter's schoolmate at the Naval Academy in 1946.

Turner now commands NATO forces in southern Europe.

Carter's first selection to head the CIA; Theodore Sorensen; withdrew his name last month after opposition arose over; among other things; his handling of classified documents while a senior aide to President John F. Kennedy.

Committee interest in Turner was expected to focus on such issues as the CIA's alleged payment of secret funds to foreign leaders; illegal domestic spying and covert operations. Congressional sources said they anticipated no serious opposition to his confirmation.

But some senators are known to have doubts about a military man in the post; and some also have expressed reservations about a CIA director without previous intelligence experience.

Baker; in raising the issue of military rank during a Senate speech; said he had asked Turner to resign his commission. But Baker did not say he would opose the nomination if the admiral refused.

Aside from that; Baker said; he found Turner ''most impressive.''

Although Baker said it would be unprecedented for a military officer to serve as CIA chief without resigning his rank; congressional sources said at least one; Gen. Bedell Smith; remained on active duty when he headed the agency from 1950 to 1953.

In addition; they said; two of the three senior military officers who headed the CIA's immedia e forerunner; the Central Intelligence Group; also retained active status.

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